

To the Hon. Secy of the Navy
with reports of Frederic Kidder

THE
DISCOVERY OF NORTH AMERICA

BY
JOHN CABOT.

*A FIRST CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF NORTH
AMERICA.*

BY FREDERIC KIDDER.

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The EDITH *and* LORNE PIERCE
COLLECTION *of* CANADIANA



Queen's University at Kingston

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Read before the Maine Historical Society, at Bath, February 17, 1874.

Reprinted from THE NEW ENGLAND HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL REGISTER
for October, 1878, by David Clapp & Son.



Map 1.



Section of the Mapamundi of Sebastian Cabot 1544

DISCOVERY OF NORTH AMERICA.

THE discovery of the New World by Columbus in 1492 may be considered as the greatest event of modern times ; but to him and his associates, as well as to all the cosmographers of his time, it was only a discovery of the eastern coast of Asia and the adjacent islands. And so Columbus lived and died, with but faint idea of the immense value to the world of what his genius and enterprise had accomplished. The news of his great discovery soon spread throughout Europe, to the wonder of every nation ; and to those who had refused to listen to his plans, or had declined to aid him in carrying them out, it must have brought feelings of bitter regret.

It is natural to suppose that a jealousy of Spain, which thus suddenly had become possessed of immense domains, should be immediately felt, particularly by Portugal and by England, each of whom had thus lost the opportunity of becoming the leading nation of the world. This feeling undoubtedly stimulated them to attempt enterprises which, a few years earlier, they would not have entertained for a moment.

England was not at this period a leading power in Europe. With a population hardly greater than the London of our day, it ranked in commerce below Portugal, and its limited navigation and trade were mostly in the hands of foreigners.

Henry the Seventh was then on the throne ; and though he had listened to the projects of Columbus, he had refused to aid in the proposed voyage of discovery. But when he heard the good for-

tune of that navigator, he no doubt thought that he might still profit by it, should he find land at the West, although he must cause it to be looked for in a more northern direction, so as not to interfere with the claims of Spain.

At this time there was residing in the city of Bristol, John Cabot, as his name has been usually written in English, who was probably a native of Genoa, but who had been naturalized as a citizen of Venice, then the most considerable commercial city of the world. He had with him three sons who had arrived at manhood, whose names are mentioned in his first patent. John Cabot was undoubtedly a man of education and a lover of science, well versed in the geography and cosmography of those times, and no doubt was bold and enterprising. Some of the accounts state that he was aided by the king, but the patent clearly states that it was at his own cost and charges; and so he must have been a man of wealth, which he freely risked in the cause of adventure and for the glory of his adopted country.

As he was a native of the same city as Columbus, and like him had sailed as a shipmaster from Venice, it is not unlikely that they were acquaintances, and had conferred together on the subject of maritime discovery and the idea of reaching India by sailing westward.

The first certain intelligence we have of his proposed voyage is the patent from Henry VII., which is subjoined. This patent to John Cabot and his sons was printed in Latin and English by Richard Hakluyt in 1582, in his "Divers Voyages touching the Discoverie of America," reprinted in 1850 as the seventh volume of the Publications of the Hakluyt Society. The patent was also printed in 1711 in Latin, in Rymer's *Fœdera*, vol. xii. p. 595. The following copy is from the "Life of Sebastian Cabot," by J. F. Nicholls, London, 1869, pages 24-6:

Henry by the grace of God &c. &c.

Be it known to all that we have given and granted, and by these presents do give and grant to our well beloved John Cabot, citizen of Venice, to Lewis, Sebastian and Sanctus, sons of the said John, and to their heirs and deputies, full and free authority, leave and power, to sail to all parts, coun-

tries and seas of the East, of the West, and of the North, under our banners and ensigns, with five ships of what burthen or quality soever they be, and as many mariners and men as they will take with them in the said ships, *upon their own proper costs and charges*, to seek out, discover and find, whatsoever Isles, Countries, Regions or Provinces of the heathen and infidels, whatsoever they be, and in whatsoever part of the world which before this time have been unknown to all Christians.

We have granted to them and every of them and their deputies, and have given them our license, to set up our banners and ensigns, in every village, town, castle, isle or mainland, of them newly found, and that the said John and his sons and their heirs may subdue, occupy and possess all such towns, cities, &c. by them found, which they can subdue, occupy and possess as our vassals and lieutenants, getting to us the rule, title and jurisdiction of said villages, towns, &c. Yet so that the said John and his sons and their heirs, of all the fruits, profits and commodities growing from such navigation, shall be bound and held to pay us, in wares or money, *the fifth part of the capital gain* so gotten for every voyage, as often as they shall arrive at our port of Bristol (at which port they shall be obliged only to arrive) deducting all manner of necessary costs and charges by them made, we giving and granting unto them and their heirs and deputies that they shall be free from all payments of customs on all such merchandise as they shall bring with them from the places so newly found. And moreover we have given and granted to them and their heirs and deputies that all the firm land, islands, villages, towns, &c. they shall chance to find may not without license of the said John Cabot and his sons, be so frequented and visited, under pain of losing their ships and all the goods of them who shall presume to sail to the places so found. Willing and commanding strictly all and singular of our subjects as well on land as on sea, to give good assistance to the said John and his sons and deputies, and that as well in arming and furnishing their ships and vessels, as in provision of food and buying victuals for their money, and all other things, by them to be provided necessary for the said navigation, they do give them all their favors and assistance.

Witness myself at Westminster 5th March in the eleventh year of our Reign.

The eleventh year of the reign of Henry the Seventh began August 22, 1495, and ended August 21, 1496. The date of this patent is therefore March 5, 1495-6; or a little more than a year before the expedition sailed under this grant.

Early in May, 1497, John Cabot, in the ship Matthew, sailed from Bristol on a voyage of discovery, in an attempt to reach India by sailing towards the west, as Columbus had done five years before.

Of the particulars of this voyage, the most important that was ever made under the British flag, English history gives no details. That he was accompanied by his son Sebastian there can be no doubt; but not another name has been preserved as of any person serving in any capacity in the ship. Of the course he steered and the consequent point of his landfall, a great difference of opinion has long existed. Most of the prominent geographers have stated it to have been some part of Newfoundland, perhaps inferring it from the name of that island, or because it would be likely to be the first to be fallen in with in such a voyage. Mr. Biddle, in the volume hereafter referred to, contends that it must have been none other than an island on the coast of Labrador; but it is now rendered certain that the first discovery of North America was on the shores of the French Acadia.

The following extract is from Belknap. The account which he quotes from Hakluyt has often been printed, but it is erroneous in many respects, as Cabot saw no inhabitants, and but slight indications of them. This statement was probably mixed up with some facts that occurred in a subsequent voyage.

On the 24th of June, very early in the morning, they were surprized with the sight of land; which, being the first they had seen, they called *Prima Vista*. The description of it is given in these words. "The island which lieth out before the land, he called St. John, because it was discovered on the day of St. John the Baptist. The inhabitants of this island wear beasts' skins. In their wars, they use bows, arrows, pikes, darts, wooden clubs, and slings. The soil is barren in some places and yieldeth little fruit; but is full of white bears and stags, far greater than ours. It yieldeth plenty of fish, and those very great, as seals and salmons. There are soles above a yard in length; but especially there is great abundance in that kind of fish which the savages call Bacalao (Cod). In the same island are hawks and eagles, as black as ravens; also partridges. The inhabitants had great plenty of copper."

This land is generally supposed to be some part of the island of Newfoundland; and Dr. Forster thinks that the name, *Prima Vista*, was after-

wards changed to *Bona Vista*, now the northern cape of Trinity bay, in Latitude $48^{\circ} 50'$. Peter Martyr's account is, that Cabot called the land Bacalaos; and there is a small island off the south cape of Trinity bay, which bears that name. Mr. Prince, in his *Chronology* (citing Galvanus for authority), says that the land discovered by Cabot was in latitude 45° . If this were true, the first discovery was made on the peninsula of Nova Scotia; and as they coasted the land northward, they must have gone into the gulf of St. Lawrence, in pursuit of their northwest passage.*

The above extract from Dr. Belknap's biography of Cabot shows that he had studied the subject with care, and arrived at conclusions which three quarters of a century afterwards have been found to be correct. In the absence of any definite account of Cabot's voyages, historians in Europe and this country have turned their attention to ascertain on what real documents the history of these voyages rests, and many have been surprised to find that there are scarcely any contemporaneous accounts relative to them in the English archives beyond the first and second patents granted by Henry VII. And so they have had to pursue their inquiries into other countries. In this new field they have been more successful, particularly in Italy and Spain. Almost the only fact that these searches have brought from the dust of the English archives is a single item from the privy-purse accounts, in the following words: "Aug. 10, 1497. To hym that found the New Isle, 10*l*." This brief memorandum shows that Cabot had then returned, and had received a gratuity from the king, who was more noted for his parsimony than for any other characteristic. The sum was then in its purchasing power fully equal to ten times that amount in our day.

The following is a letter procured for the English Record Commission from Milan:

Letter of Lorenzo Pasqualigo to his Brothers Alvise and Francesco.

The Venetian, our countryman, who went with a ship from Bristol in quest of new islands, is returned, and says, that 700 leagues hence, he discovered land in the territory of the Grand Cham. He coasted for 300 leagues, and landed; saw no human beings, but he has brought hither to the king certain snares which had been set to catch game, and a needle for

* Belknap's American Biography, vol. i. p. 152-3.

making nets; he also found some felled trees, wherefore he supposed there were inhabitants, and returned to his ship in alarm.

He was three months on the voyage; and, on his return, saw two islands to starboard, but would not land, time being precious, as he was short of provisions. He says that the tides are slack, and do not flow as they do here. The King of England is much pleased with this intelligence.

The King has promised that in the spring our countryman shall have ten ships; and, at his request, has conceded to him all the prisoners, except such as are confined for high treason, to man his fleet. The King has also given him money wherewith to amuse himself till then; and he is now at Bristol with his wife, who is also Venetian, and with his sons. His name is Juan Cabot, and he is styled the great admiral. Vast honor is paid him; he dresses in silk; and these English run after him like mad people, so that he can enlist as many of them as he pleases, and a number of our own rogues besides.

The discoverer of these places planted on his new-found land a large cross, with one flag of England, and one of St. Mark, by reason of his being a Venetian, so that our banner has floated very far afield.

London, 23d Aug. 1497.*

Lorenzo Pasqualigo was a Venetian merchant residing in London. In this letter of Pasqualigo we have what will probably be the best account we shall ever find of Cabot's first voyage, and the discovery of North America about a year before Columbus saw the new continent, and the claim of England to the country has always rested on this discovery.

The next question is to ascertain the locality of Cabot's Prima Vista, and of the islands he afterwards visited. Fortunately for all interested in American history, we have now the map made by or under the direction of Sebastian Cabot which had long been missing, but was a few years since found in a library in Germany. A *fac simile* of this very valuable chart was published by the celebrated geographer, M. Jomard, at Paris. A section of this map is given with this article. (See Map 1.)† A reference to it will show that

* Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, October 21, 1865.

† This section of Cabot's Mapamundi is photo-electrotyped from a larger section, which illustrates an article on "John Cabot's Voyage of 1497," by J. Carson Brevoort, LL.D., in the "Historical Magazine" for March, 1868. Mr. Brevoort indicates a somewhat similar route. When this paper was written, I had not read his article.

the maker of the map has placed the Prima Vista near the eastern point of our present island of Cape Breton, and as the Gut of Canso had not then been discovered, the island on the map forms a part of our present Nova Scotia.

As Sebastian Cabot accompanied his father, and afterwards was noted for his ability in projecting the most famous charts of the new discoveries of himself and others, this map must be considered to possess a value beyond any of the earliest charts of our coast.

The next question to be considered is, what course did Cabot pursue after leaving his Prima Vista, and what other land did he see? Some writers have stated that he took a southern direction and reached as far south as the latitude of the Chesapeake. To this assertion we can now state that he could have been absent from England only about ninety days, a period so short that a direct voyage and return could hardly be accomplished in it by a sailing vessel in our own day, with all the great improvements in ships and navigation; and so toward the south he could not have had time for much examination of the coast, but must very soon have turned his prow in a homeward direction. The statement that he was short of provisions must be taken as only an excuse for his not wishing to make further search on this then barren and forbidding coast; for it can hardly be credited that any prudent commander would have sailed on such a voyage provisioned for less than six months. So we must conclude that the short period he was absent must have been occupied in going and returning, and that he saw nothing of the coast south of his first landfall.

The letter of Pasqualigo states that he coasted for 300 leagues, and that he "saw two islands to starboard," that is, on the right hand side. Now let us look on the chart of that part of our coast and see where such a locality can be found. Let us suppose that he steered in a northerly direction, passed through Northumberland Strait, sighting the coast near Miramichi, and turned his prow northeasterly, passing to the north of Newfoundland homeward through the Straits of Belle Isle. This route is represented by a dotted line on map No. II. accompanying this paper.

The distance from Cape Breton to the farthest point of Newfound-

land may not much exceed two hundred leagues, but he may have counted in all the various windings which his desire to see these shores or the headwinds caused, and so the direct distance would be very much increased.



It is likely, that after passing the point of his *Prima Terra Vista*, he steered in a northwesterly direction, so as to obtain a good view of his *Isle St. Juan*, for he lays it down quite correctly, and it may be that he went round it, and then falling in with the Labrador shore, altered his course easterly; and so he would have made up nearly his three hundred leagues before he was out of sight of the mountains on the northeasterly shore of Newfoundland.

It will be seen that Cabot's map does not lay down Newfoundland as one large island, as it mainly is, but rather gives the outlines of a group of islands which would cover the spot where that should be

placed. To reconcile this apparent error, I have conversed with persons who have for a long time navigated along these shores and are familiar with its appearance, who say that for a considerable part of the time in the summer months it is enveloped in a fog, and so only the mountains in the interior and the smaller islands and cliffs of the mainland are visible; and a navigator at the present day who should pass over the track which Cabot may have taken, would very often see first these highlands, and if he should sketch them as they appeared day after day, he would be likely to make them several islands rather than a single one, as we know that Newfoundland is of a very irregular formation.

By referring again to the letter, it will be seen that it states the point of discovery as seven hundred leagues distant. This is not far from the real distance from the Prima Vista to the west coast of England, as shown in our latest charts. The island marked on the Cabot map "I. del Juan," we readily recognize as the one long known as St. John, which name it bore till late in the last century, when it was changed by the English to Prince Edward Island.* So the original name would seem to verify the point of discovery.

We note one more striking feature as described in the letter of Pasqualigo. It states that "the tides are slack and do not flow as here" [in England]. Now we know that the tides on the western coast of England are very high. The admiralty charts, lately published, show that in the vicinity of Bristol are the highest tides in Europe. At King's Road, from which Cabot sailed, the tide is 36 feet, while near there it is still higher. At Cabot's Prima Terra Vista and the Isle St. John, the tides are so much less that they would naturally attract the attention of an enterprising and intelligent navigator who should for the first time observe the great difference. The tides here are only from two and three quarters to four feet; and along the coasts of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, they are very small.†

* The name was changed by legislative enactment in 1799. It was called Prince Edward Island in honor of Edward, Duke of Kent, father of the present queen of England.

† The tides in the Bay of Fundy are very peculiar. In the Bay of Minas they are forty-three feet, and along the whole of the upper part of the bay they will average forty-two feet, occasionally rising to fifty feet, the highest on the shores of our continent; while at Cape Sable, at the eastern entrance of the Bay of Fundy, the tide averages only about five feet, as shown by a recent survey by Henry Mitchell, Esq., of the United States Coast Survey.

Nothing in the accounts of Cabot's first voyage is better fixed than the date of the first discovery of land, namely, on St. John's day, which we know is the 24th day of June. If we allow him a week for his landings and explorations of the new found lands before proceeding on his voyage, and then note the date of the gratuity given him by the king, August 10, we see that he had only forty days to reach Bristol and make the journey and present himself to the king at London; so that it is nearly impossible that he should have gone even a day's sail to the southward of his Prima Vista, or taken any other than almost a direct course for England. I have therefore ventured, on a map of the region visited, to designate by a dotted line what I have here tried to explain as the course which Cabot probably took after his first sight of land. This course, it seems to me, is the only one by which in so short a time he could reach England, and make the account given by the Venetian merchant clear and definite.

The second patent, dated the third of February, 1498, is to "John Kabotto, Venecian," *the sons not being mentioned*. It was first printed in 1831, in Richard Biddle's "Memoir of Sebastian Cabot," a somewhat remarkable work, in which the author displayed great research. It is evidently his desire to prove that the principal honor of the discovery of North America belonged to the son, while the documents he brings forward show that it certainly should be awarded to the father. This line of argument seems to be very popular with English writers, who also labor to prove that Sebastian Cabot was born in England, though facts and probabilities indicate the reverse.

It would be departing from the plan to which I wish to confine the limits of this paper, to notice the subsequent voyages of the Cabots; but it may be proper to give a brief synopsis of what they may have done on these shores.

A second voyage was undoubtedly made, very likely in the year 1498, in which Cabot seems to have attempted to find a northwest passage to Cathay. In it he is said to have reached the latitude of 67° 30' N.; and although he saw an open sea before him, he was compelled to return by his refractory sailors; and that subsequently,

in this or another voyage, he sailed as far south as the latitude of Cuba.

But the history of all the voyages of the Cabots is extremely meagre and unsatisfactory; and as we have only undertaken to locate the point of his first landfall and his probable route till he left the coast, we leave to future historians to settle the details of his subsequent career.

It seems strange that among the numerous writers who have recorded the claims of England in the field of maritime discovery, no one has given to the world a thorough history of the Cabots, compiled from the materials which late research has brought to light, thus enabling us to know more of those remarkable voyages that resulted in such immense advantage to England and her descendants.

These voyages must certainly be ranked as of value equal to that of Columbus, which gave to Spain and Portugal domains tenfold greater than their own.

